

Sleepless in High School

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by Lee Choi, Senior

1 Sunshine streams into the classroom, but many students, sometimes even those in the front row, are nodding sleepily. Why? The answer is simple: they are sleep-deprived teens. Far too many teens are forced out of bed and shuttled off to school before they have had enough sleep. The result is that countless classes across the country, particularly first-period classes, are filled with drowsy students who are unable to make their best effort. As Dr. Mary Carskadon of Brown University School of Medicine observes, "The students may be in school, but their brains are at home on their pillows." This problem can be easily solved: begin school later in the day so that teens are able to get the amount of sleep they require.

2 When this issue is raised, many adults shrug and ask why things should be changed now. Are today's teens just whinier and less able to stand up to the daily stress of school, work, and living? That is not at all the case. This is a very real problem, one that is finally being noticed by health experts and even by some school systems, which have already moved their starting times to later in the morning.

3 Feeling too tired to function is not just a teen's way of trying to make excuses and weasel out of doing work. Teens are in need of 9.25 hours of sleep nightly, but 71 percent of 12- to 14-year-olds and 90 percent of 15- to 17-year-olds get less than this, according to the 2014 Sleep in America poll conducted by the National Sleep Foundation. Most teens aged 13 to 18 go to bed at 11:00 p.m. or later on school nights. High schools begin at an average time of 7:59 a.m., and teens must be up considerably earlier to prepare for school and travel there. Therefore, they are clearly not receiving the amount of sleep they require. According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), extreme sleepiness causes a reduction in short-term memory and in the ability to learn. These should certainly be relevant concerns for every parent, educator, and school administrator. How can teens possibly receive a reasonable education if they are too tired to pay proper attention?

4 Lack of sleep affects teens in other ways, too. According to the NIH, teens are a population at risk. Drivers aged 15 or younger are involved in more than half of the 100,000 wrecks caused by fatigue each year in the United States. Studies show that physical changes in teens interfere with their ability to function and increase the likelihood of injury. While this may not seem to relate to the necessity of having a later start time to the school day, it does. If teens are too tired to do well driving, an undertaking that most look forward to with glee, an equivalent problem with paying attention to their studies surely exists. Also, getting the amount of sleep they require would undoubtedly improve their ability to function in all areas, including driving.

5 Although irate parents and teachers often feel that teens lack the self-discipline necessary to get the proper amount of sleep, they are incorrect. NIH studies report a physiological tendency for teens to fall asleep at a later hour and to awaken at a later hour as well. This is not something that they plan to do, but something that their bodies dictate. Indeed, one sleep expert confirms that many teens are not physiologically able to go to sleep until 10:00 or 11:00 p.m. This, of course, makes it impossible for them to get the required amount of sleep before getting up and going to school. A national poll conducted by the National Sleep Foundation revealed that more than 60 percent of the students under 18 were tired during the day, and 15 percent said that they had fallen asleep in class during the past year.

6 Some studies of schools using later starting times have revealed that students are more rested and better able to participate. Schools starting no earlier than 9:00 a.m. are better suited to the needs of teenagers. One school district that delayed its starting time by an hour found that the percentage of their high-school students getting at least 8 hours of sleep a night went from 21 percent to 51 percent. In addition, they reported the interesting fact that during the two years after changing the school start time, the number of car accidents statewide increased 8 percent while the number of accidents in their county decreased by over 15 percent. The students of another school district that changed to a later start time reported that on the new schedule they slept more, made better grades, and, in general, felt less depressed.

7 Some schools already begin at a later time, like 9:00 a.m., in order to accommodate the needs of the teenagers they serve, but more need to follow suit. Students deserve the opportunity to receive the best education possible and to be alert enough to make the most of their lives. If starting school an hour later offers us teenagers this opportunity, isn't it our community's duty to make that change?